The Sacred and Mundane in a Changing India

— A Photo Essay —

Colin Todhunter

About the Author

Colin Todhunter is an independent researcher and writer and has spent many years in India. He is a research associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (Montreal) and usually writes on food, agriculture and development issues. In 2018, in recognition of his writing, he was named a Living Peace and Justice Leader and Model by Engaging Peace Inc.

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Introduction

The pace of change in urban India, especially in the major cities, has accelerated significantly over the last decade. Massive infrastructure projects have transformed entire neighbourhoods, with many disappearing altogether.

At the same time, the forces of modernity and neoliberal globalisation are reshaping India, often appearing to disrupt longstanding cultural rhythms. These rhythms are deeply rooted in specific places and spaces. Nevertheless, spiritual traditions continue to serve as vital threads that sustain social cohesion and collective wellbeing amid these changes.

When writers discuss India, they often mention religion and the ‘sacred’. However, the ‘sacred’ is not always religious; it can also hold profound cultural and symbolic meaning for communities, extending beyond religious boundaries. In this sense, sacredness—whether religious or cultural—is a powerful anchor, connecting people to shared history, collective memory and a sense of belonging.

The sacred is visible in traditions, attire and rituals that mark identity. In a rapidly modernising context, these markers create a meaningful and powerful contrast.

The ‘spiritual’, which underpins the sacred, refers to thoughts, beliefs and feelings about the meaning of life, beyond mere physical existence—a sense of connection to something greater than ourselves.

Today, the spiritual and the local coexist alongside the self-centredness of modern urban life, the growing uniformity of thought and behaviour and a consumerism that often becomes an end in itself.

This photo essay uses visual-based storytelling via low-resolution street photography. It provides brief glimpses into the endurance the sacred and the spiritual amid the everyday pressures to be found in modern urban settings.

The 26 screenshot images are from a series of handheld phone videos taken between 2022 and 2025 and depict scenes from Bhopal, Chennai, Jodhpur, Jaipur and Kolkata.

Using an affordable device was an intentional choice that reflects a commitment to democratising

visual storytelling and capturing lived realities without the gloss of professional aesthetics or the intrusiveness of expensive equipment.

The viewer is offered an unvarnished look at life. The essay highlights how commerce, spirituality and daily survival intertwine in ways that resist simple separation into secular and sacred spheres.

This publication is the third in a series of visual-based storytelling focusing on India by the author and connects directly with his broader work on development, food and agriculture. It explores how deep-rooted cultural and spiritual values persist amid the pressures of modernisation, neoliberalism and capitalist commodification.

This work is freely accessible, in keeping with a commitment to democratising knowledge and amplifying issues often overlooked in the mainstream.

For unrestricted access to the author's work, visit https://figshare.com/authors/Colin_Todhunter/21220973

Tradition meets modernity (Jaipur 2025)

The looming flyover hides a second concrete eyesore above it that supports the city’s metro line. Real estate developments, huge infrastructure projects and global consumerism are changing the fabric of urban India, its communities and its ways of life. Yet traditions remain deeply woven into everyday activities, anchoring personal and social identities amid rapid change.

Across the street from a Hindu shrine (Kolkata 2024)

When walking the cramped, noisy lanes of any Indian town or city, the interweaving of commerce, everyday survival and spirituality is striking. A phenomenon that resists the tendency to compartmentalise life into discrete spheres of ‘work’ and ‘faith,’ ‘secular’ and ‘sacred.’ This seamless blend creates a vibrant rhythm where rituals and trade pulse side by side, shaping the unique soul of these streets.

FIZZ

Sacred wrist thread (Jodhpur 2025)

The sacred spills out of temple walls and into marketplaces, shops and alleyways. While societal structures may evolve externally, fundamental cultural and spiritual values remain deeply entrenched. The Mauli thread symbolises divine protection and carries deep spiritual significance, weaving a quiet thread of faith through the bustle of daily life. Often tied around wrists or sacred objects, it serves as a tangible bond between the wearer and the divine, embodying blessings, hope and resilience.

Hindu shrine near gate of old city (Jaipur 2025)

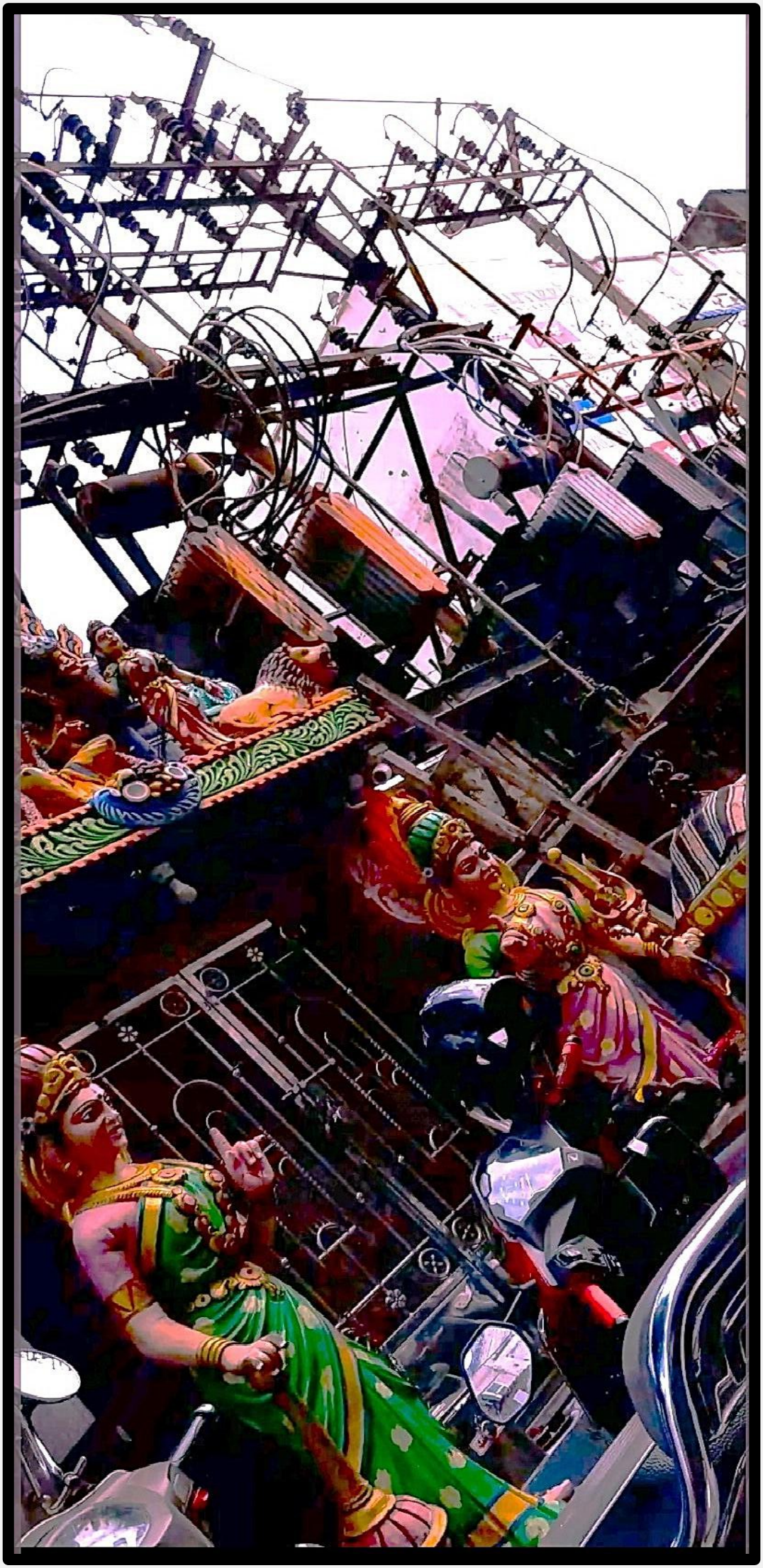
Shiva and Parvati greet people at a streetside or wayside shrine as they walk towards one of the gates of the old city. Shiva, the ascetic god of transformation and destruction, and Parvati, the nurturing goddess of fertility and devotion, together embody the balance of power and compassion. Their presence offers a moment of spiritual connection amid the daily bustle, inviting passersby to pause, reflect and find blessings on their journey.

Backstreet temple (Chennai 2024)

Indian urbanism allows for the coexistence of age-old practices with contemporary realities. Shrines rest beside fruit stalls, and gods and goddesses watch over neighbourhoods, shops and homes. These backstreet temples—often small, tucked into narrow lanes—are essential threads in the social and spiritual fabric of the city. They offer local communities accessible places for daily worship and ritual, reinforcing a sense of continuity and belonging amid the flux of urban life and rapid modernisation.

Power (Chennai 2022)

A Hindu temple sits next to an electricity station in one of the cramped lanes of Sowcarpet. The power of religion and the power of Tamil Nadu Electricity Board. Which is more important?



Hindu deities for sale (Jaipur 2025)

These printed pictures represent Hindu gods and goddesses and are widely revered. They provide a portable, accessible way for devotees to connect with the divine in their homes, businesses and places of work. Often crafted with vibrant colours and symbolic iconography, these images serve as focal points for daily worship, blessings and protection, reflecting the adaptability of devotion in modern life while maintaining deep spiritual significance.

Tilak in Triplicane (Chennai 2023)

The man's forehead marking, a tilak, associated with Vishnu, serves as a visible symbol of his religious identity and devotion amid the bustling nighttime cityscape. The presence of this marking illustrates how religious practices are seamlessly integrated into daily life, even in secular spaces. This man's visible devotion, even outside a mundane setting like a restaurant in the Triplicane area of the city, reflects the blending of the sacred and the secular in everyday life.

Auto (Chennai 2023) & woman’s eyes (Jaipur 2025)

Hindu symbolism in everyday settings reinforces cultural connections within modern contexts, often featuring vibrant artistic styles and blending functionality with cultural significance. The eyes on the auto rickshaw serve as protective talismans, believed to ward off negative energies and bring good luck—a practice deeply rooted in folk beliefs. Similarly, the stylised depiction of eyes embraced as a fashion statement by some women carries both aesthetic appeal and spiritual meaning, illustrating how traditional symbols persist and evolve within contemporary life.

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AX.9648

Shopping for jewellery (Jaipur 2025)

Spirituality permeates every aspect of life, helping to sustain personal and social identity and resilience. The red dye seen on the centre parting is called sindoor, a symbol of marital status traditionally worn by married Hindu women along the parting of their hair. Its application signifies the bond of love, devotion and commitment in marriage, serving as a daily ritual that reinforces family and social ties. Culturally, sindoor is linked to Goddess Parvati, embodying the ideals of a devoted wife and sustaining the spiritual connection between divine feminine strength and earthly relationships.

Welcome! Kolam creation to celebrate marriage (Chennai 2024)

Deep-rooted beliefs and practices help resist the homogenising forces of neoliberalism, capitalist commodification and an increasingly prevalent consumerist mindset. The artistic kolam patterns drawn by women at entrances, the temple festivals amid urban chaos and the small acts of care, giving and devotion assert spiritual sovereignty and communal belonging. Through kolam, women also assert their presence in the public domain, transforming everyday thresholds into spaces of creativity and cultural expression. These vibrant traditions serve as acts of cultural resilience, preserving and renewing collective identity through ritual and creativity in the face of social and economic change.

WELCO

Shiva’s trident (Bhopal 2025)

Ascetic sadhus are commonplace in India, but the global market economy’s encroachment remakes both rural and urban landscapes, undermining or erasing embedded cultural rhythms and imposing a sanitised, commodified vision of modernity, consumerism and ‘progress’. This transformation challenges traditional ways of life, as sacred practices and spaces increasingly confront the pressures of economic development and homogenisation, risking the loss of diverse cultural identities and spiritual depth.

Priest in Thousand Lights (2024)

An elderly Hindu priest in the Thousand Lights area of Chennai. This area of the city is increasingly defined by change and gentrification. He is a living link to the area's past, a reminder of the deep-rooted spiritual traditions that have long been integral to the city's identity. The Thousand Lights area, once characterised by low-rise buildings and community-oriented spaces, is now giving way to gentrification with high-rise offices, hotels and apartments. Behind the statistics of economic growth and real estate developments are individuals and communities navigating significant cultural and social transitions.

சுரங்க நடைபாதை
SUBWAY

Men of the soil (Bhopal 2025)

These men, from the city's rural surroundings, embody the ‘sacred’. Striding confidently through the city, they are a living expression of deep-rooted cultural identity that sets them apart. Their traditional white kurtas, dhotis and footwear are a visible sign of their heritage. Powerful symbols that anchor them in a time and place and a way of life that exists far from the city's chaotic rhythm.

VIJAY TRADERS
oppo

God is present (Chennai 2023)

Hindu deities for sale as a woman with a bindi on her forehead (a ritual adornment symbolising the ‘third eye’ or ajna chakra—the seat of wisdom, intuition and spiritual insight). It is often linked to inner vision and connection to the divine. The dark red tilaka mark, often made with kumkum (red vermilion powder), represents auspiciousness, devotion and the presence of the divine.

Tattoo (Jodhpur 2025)

Some women pair traditional attire and symbols like the bindi—a sacred mark that traditionally signified spiritual focus and cultural identity—with modern, western-style tattoos. Women navigate modernity by embracing both heritage and new forms of self-identity, capturing the intertwining of the sacred and the mundane in the evolving urban landscape, where ancient cultural symbols coexist with global, personal styles in daily life.

next

Temple priests (Chennai 2024)

Their bare-chested appearance is traditional for Brahmin priests in South Indian temples. This symbolises purity and humility before the temple deity. The Vishnu tilak on their foreheads, vertical lines forming a U-shape, is a distinctive mark of Vaishnava devotees. This tilak, known as Urdhva Pundra, represents the feet of Lord Vishnu and signifies the priests' dedication to Vishnu worship. The thread passing over their shoulders, known as Yajnopavita or sacred thread, is a symbol of spiritual initiation and marks them as twice-born (Dvija) in the Hindu tradition.

Shiva devotees (Chennai 2024)

Revving it up in the Triplicane area of the city, publicly displaying their devotion, probably after having visited one of the many temples in the area. The two-wheeler symbolises women’s increasing physical and social mobility, independence and the changing dynamics of urban life. Although the woman's forward motion implies progress and empowerment, there is still a continued powerful connection to cultural roots.

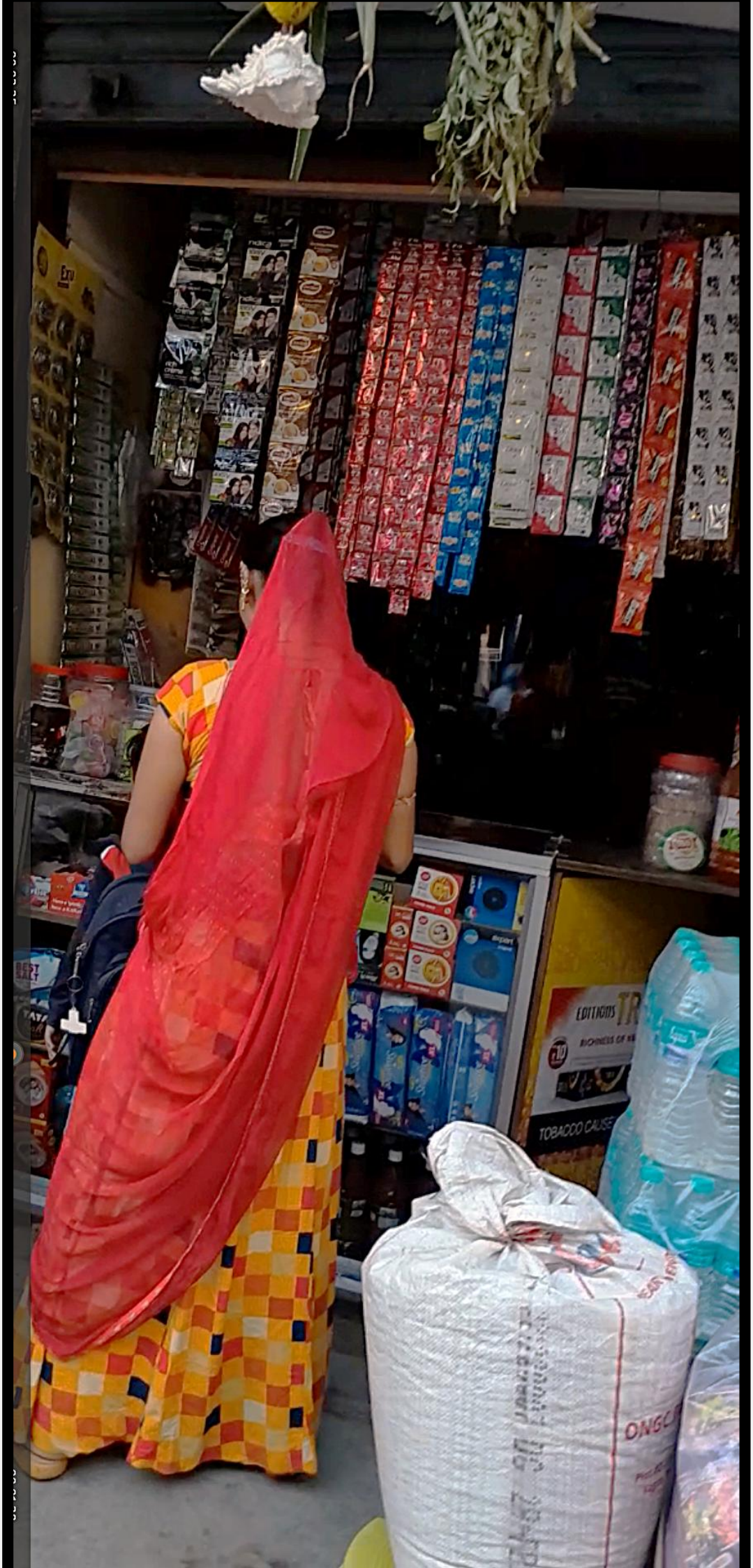
HONDA
TN06A
0951

Asking (Bhopal 2025)

Dharma reverberates across the landscape: duty, righteousness and interconnectedness tie individual actions to the wellbeing of community and environment. Many dharmic traditions emphasise the significance of seva (selfless service), with charitable giving—known as dana in Sanskrit—considered an essential aspect of one’s dharma or religious duty. This practice is perceived not merely as a moral obligation but as a spiritual endeavour that fosters personal growth and good karma.

Conch shell and leaves (Chennai 2024)

Note the presence of the shell and leaves hanging outside this kirana store on Mint Street in Sowcarpet. They carry deep symbolic meaning rooted in Hindu philosophy and cultural traditions. The conch shell is sacred and associated with Vishnu, the preserver deity. It is used in rituals and symbolises purity and prosperity. A lime hangs above the shell. They are often accompanied by green chillis to protect against negative energies. They are also associated with prosperity and abundance. This practice reflects the integration of spiritual beliefs into everyday life, illustrating how tradition continues to influence contemporary commerce.


TOBACCO CAUSES

Friendship (Jaipur 2025)

Friendship is rootedness and can be regarded as sacred when based on humility, equality and affection. There are those who question dominant narratives of progress, which equate technological acceleration, competition, urban gentrification and the destruction of age-old neighbourhoods and market expansion with ‘development’. However, there is a longing for rootedness and a sense of connectedness with reverence for individuals and communities. This is reaffirmed daily through ritual, work and interactions on the street.

Mobile in Jodhpur (2025)

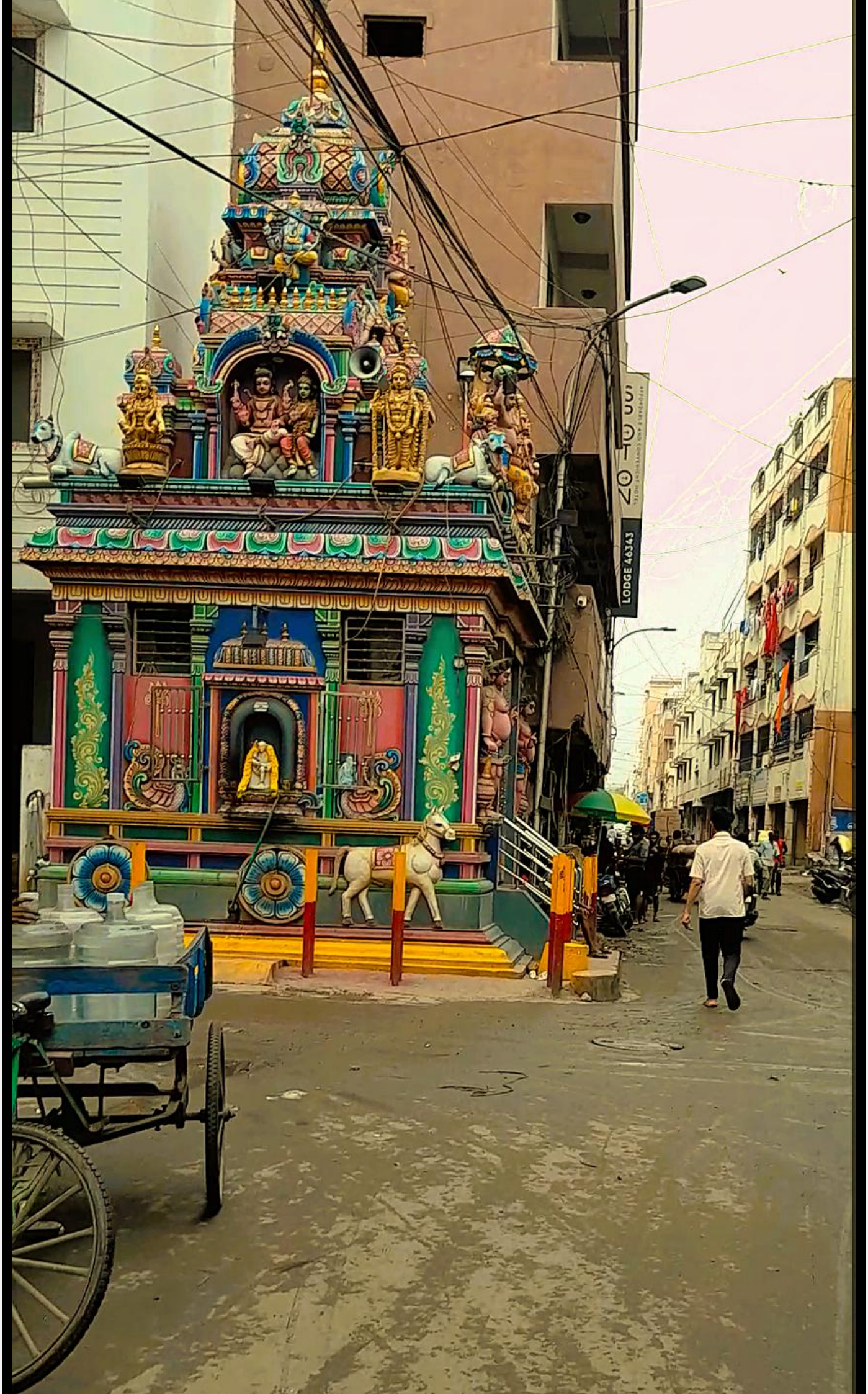
Bangles, borla (a traditional forehead ornament) and tattoos are commonly seen on many women in Rajasthan, reflecting the region's rich cultural heritage and traditional adornment practices. Such traditions may not be sacred in a religious way, but they are often ‘set apart’ in cultural value and symbolic meaning, anchoring a society or group in its shared history and collective memory.
These adornments act as visible markers of identity and belonging,

Garlands (Chennai 2023)

Restaurant cashier watched over by Hindu deities. The flower garlands behind hold a significant place in Indian culture. Garlands are integral to religious practices, social ceremonies and expressions of hospitality. Flower garlands are commonly used in Hindu worship rituals, known as ‘puja’. They are presented to deities in temples and home shrines as a gesture of honour and devotion. Each flower has its own significance. For example, marigolds symbolise auspiciousness; jasmine represents purity.

The sacred and the mundane (Chennai 2024)

In the bustling George Town area of Chennai, a colourful small streetside temple emerges as a striking focal point amid the functional box-type apartments that characterise the neighbourhood. The temple, with its ornate carvings and bright hues, serves as a testament to traditional Tamil architecture and religious practices, while the nearby apartments reflect a more contemporary, practical approach to urban living.


LODGE 46343

Sowcarpet area of Chennai (2023)

Entering a Sowcarpet lane on a dusty, hazy day reveals a tightly packed commercial and residential area with neighbourhoods within neighbourhoods. Around every corner, a shrine or temple stands as a symbol of the spiritual glue that binds the community together. These sacred sites offer focal points for collective identity and everyday resilience amid the dense urban fabric, embedding faith deeply into the rhythms of daily life.

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